

An exploration of gozitan band club culture & parish politics

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A B S T R A C T

The Maltese Archipelago is comprised of three islands; Malta, Comino, and Gozo. It is a Catholic nation who observes the cult of saints in the form of the feast day celebrations, otherwise known as festa. Jeremy Boissevain published his seminal work, *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta* in 1965. Though it has been 43 years since the publishing of this work, it is still considered the leading resource on the topic social anthropology in the Mediterranean, but specifically for Malta. Using Boissevain's work as a foundation and my recent trip to Gozo, I will explore the relations between competing persons and groups, particularly those related to the religious and secular celebrations associated with festa, and how competition between band club groups has gone from being sometimes violent to more friendly with a change in the demographic of the committee members, e.g. different political affiliation and socio-economic status. I will demonstrate the complexity of Maltese life. Whether the Maltese have learned to preserve their band club culture and festa celebrations as a direct result of conflict resolution is still a work in progress, though great strides have been made to protect the outward appearance of unity amongst the Maltese. The question still exists as to whether they have succeeded.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

Band Club, Festa, Titular Feasts, Titular Saints, Primary Saints, Secondary Saints, Cult of the Saints, Knights of St. John, Knights of Malta

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The Maltese Language

Included here is a guide to the Maltese language for the purposes of assisting the reader with the Maltese names and words that appear throughout this paper. Maltese is spoken on all the islands of the Maltese Archipelago, and by all classes. The language is morphologically related to North African Arabic, but draws much of its vocabulary, syntax, and idiom from Sicilian (Boissevain, 1965: X).

In general, vowels have much the same sound as they do in Italian. The following consonants are pronounced as indicated: c: chair; g: gentle; g: gift; h: silent; h: aspirate; gh: the ghan, is usually silent; j: year; q: glottal stop; x: shine; z: zebra; and z: boots.

Introduction

The Maltese archipelago forms a port of call between Europe and North Africa, between the Christian and the Moslem worlds. The Maltese have been in contact with both for centuries, and the cultures of both have contributed many traits which the islanders have adapted to their own use (Jeremy Boissevain, *Saints and Fireworks*, 1965:1).

Jeremy Boissevain conducted research on Malta in 1960 and 1961 focusing the majority of his efforts on the main island of Malta; and its national organizations, leadership, the church and village relations. Boissevain includes some brief comparison between Malta and her sister island Gozo, specifically examining the relationship between Our Lady of the Assumption at the Citadel Cathedral, and that of Basilika San Gorg, the competing parishes in Victoria. Boissevain has continued to build his research into a life-long body of work, but his book, *Saints and Fireworks* published in 1965, is among the first examples of his research, and stands today as the leading resource on the subject of social anthropology in the Mediterranean with a specific focus on Malta.

Using Boissevain's book as a guide I visited two libraries and attended three festa celebrations in Qala, San Lawrence and Victoria, respectively. Boissevain's research on the exploration of relations between competing groups, issues and influence is somewhat broad. I chose to narrow the focus of my research for the scope of this paper. It became possible to examine Gozo and her inhabitants on a level more consistent with one of the many attributes Gozitans seem to measure community, through participation. I chose to examine Gozo and Gozitans more closely, their sense of community and responsibility to their church and saints, as practiced by the musicians in the local band clubs. In doing so I had the opportunity to glimpse the inner workings of the religious and secular celebrations associated with the cult of the saints.

History

The Maltese Archipelago is located close to the center of the Mediterranean Sea, approximately 58 miles south of Sicily, 220 miles north of Tripoli, and 200 miles west of Tunis. Malta is geographically poised between Europe and North Africa in a melting pot of culture. The rulers who sought to control the islands in strategic alliances would fall to the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks and Romans, among others. In approximately A.D. 870 Malta fell under Muslim rule before passing to the Normans, but by 1530 and

several rulers and nations later it was Emperor Charles the V who gave the islands to the Sovereign Military Order of St. John of Jerusalem. Other names the Order was to be known by are the Knights of St. John, the Knights of Malta, or the Knights Hospitaller. The Order vowed to help the poor and care for the sick, in addition to waging war against Islam, among other things. The knights held the islands until they were driven out by Napoleon in 1798 (Dugate and Selby 1973). The British replaced the French in 1800, but it wasn't until 1814 that the islands were formally ceded to Britain under the Treaty of Paris (Dugate and Selby 1973; Nicholson 2003). The Maltese islands remained in British control until receiving their independence in 1964. Most recently, Malta has become a member of the European Union.

Ministry of Education

An event cited as one of the most important in Malta's early history is the shipwreck of Paul the Apostle in A.D. 60. It is widely believed that Paul converted many Maltese people to Christianity. The only event confirmed as true is the baptizing of the Roman governor, Publius, who became Malta's first Bishop. Saint Paul is considered the principal patron saint of the islands, usually called Missierna San Pawl, or "Our Father St. Paul" (Boissevain 1965:4). It is thought that the line of bishops established with Publius was broken during the period of Muslim rule, and re-established upon Norman rule two hundred years later. My only intent is to demonstrate that the Maltese people in general have a long and proud history, and they believe that it has developed from this apostolic beginning (Buhagiar 2007). There is some speculation historically that the Pauline myth is not true. However, this is less important and undermines the Maltese need for establishing their national identity, whether the event is historically accurate or invented identity. Either way, it continues to have bearing on the future of the islands, in the villages and in the band clubs today.

Band Clubs, Village Parishes, and Politics

The Maltese islands form a province of the Catholic Church (Boissevain 1965). Administration of the islands, both religious and secular, is largely governed from the main island of Malta in the capital of Valletta (Falzon 2007). The islands are divided into the Archdiocese of Malta and the Diocese of Gozo, and then separated into several parishes. Boissevain, using a Catholic dictionary, defines a parish as the "basic social and territorial unit of the Church" (Boissevain 1965:16). Every village is a separate parish, though some villages may have two

or more, as they do in Victoria. Over a period of years, there have existed disputes between the church and political parties on the islands.

It is not my intention to discuss these at any length; it is important to understand that they exist, in addition to other secular and religious interests in the village that are not related to national politics. In centuries past, whenever the Maltese lacked a form of centralized government the church acted on behalf of the people, representing and protecting their interests. For this reason it is important to understand the history and relationship between the Maltese people, including Gozitans, and their village parishes as they relate to band clubs.

The band club culture developed in Malta during the years of British colonial rule. Stylized after the Sicilian groups of the mid-nineteenth century and similarly to British military bands, the Gozo band clubs perform at social functions. In Gozo, the performances are particularly related to feast celebrations and for visiting dignitaries. Boissevain discusses the band partiti (singular partit) in association with the development of band club culture and its relationship to party politics (Boissevain 1965:74-96). It is my understanding this is true mostly of band clubs on the island of Malta and not so much for those on the island of Gozo. Generally speaking, while politics in Malta are effectively in play throughout the islands, it is in Malta where the majority of political strife is displayed in and out of all things religious and secular. In Gozo however, a more rural island community, there is a certain amount of autonomy whereby Gozitans are less competitive with Malta and more so within their own village parishes.

Gozitans develop their familial affinity and political affiliations early in life as part of their sense of identity. An adolescent of twelve begins to understand and make choices for themselves in these areas. By the time a young person is fifteen years of age, he/she becomes increasingly more active within the organizations he/she chooses to support. For band clubs, a young person will be invited to become a member and learn to play an instrument. The budding musician is tutored and mentored by a senior musician within the club. The instrument may be chosen by the student, or if there is a specific need, the instrument will be assigned to him/her by the master teacher. It all depends upon the needs of the club. The young student will continue lessons until the time is suitable for him/her to join the ranks of the band during public performances, usually one and a half to two years, or around the age of fourteen or fifteen. Generally, there is no training in public school and the novice moves forward within the organization based upon availability of space.

Prior to the development of the current Leone Band Club facility and theatre in 1975, the club used much smaller premises. The theatre functions as a community cultural venue, used for band club rehearsal and performance to full operatic productions, sometimes including choirs, in addition to a community center and dance club. The band club leadership is comprised of a central committee and several sub-committees. The sub-committees are in charge of different portions of the celebration around the feast day, or festa, e.g. fireworks, band marches, street decorations, sports and horse racing. The horse racing as part of the festa celebration originally began in 1587. The races take place on the day of festa about two o'clock in the afternoon, down the middle of Republic Street, the main thoroughfare in the city of Victoria. The horses and riders come from different parts of the Maltese islands, traveling to several festa celebrations during the course of a year to compete. Originally horses were used primarily for farming and transportation. The races developed into another way for the Maltese people to show dedication to their saints and bring prestige to their village. In centuries past the winner of the race was presented with a palju, a type of flag or banner, but in modern times the winner receives a trophy (Attard Interview 2008).

Festa

On Gozo, the citadel in Victoria (Rabat to Gozitans) is located at the point of highest elevation on the island, and it can be seen from many of the other villages. Within this fortified city of limestone is the Cathedral, Our Lady of the Assumption. The Cathedral is the church of the Bishop, where he has his cathedra, or chair. The titular or primary saint is Santa Maria, the Blessed Virgin, also referred to as Our Lady. The Assumption refers to an event whereby God takes her body without corruption to be united with the resurrected body of Jesus. During my stay in Gozo, Victoria observed festa, or the feast day for Our Lady. While planning and preparations begin months in advance there are several key events leading up to the festa on 15 August. The festa celebration is separated into two parts, the religious celebration in the church, and the outer or secular celebration in the streets. It is sometimes difficult to separate the sacred from the secular, because the overall festa is a sacred celebration in the minds of Gozitans. Perhaps a better way to categorize for my purposes here would be as visible versus obscured from the public eye (inside vs. outside).

The church preparations for the celebration honoring The Assumption begin on the first Wednesday in May. There are 15 Wednesdays, or l-Erbghat ta' Santa Maria, that

make up the months, and the celebration in church for the preparation for the feast. L-Erbghat in Maltese is Wednesday, plural l-Erbghat. The religious celebration is comprised of sermon, song, history of the festa, how devotions came about while the priest exhorts the parishioners to be devout to their Saint. Following the 15 Wednesdays, are the 15 days just prior to the celebration, known as the Kwindicina, up to and including August 14th, which make up the days of preparation. Kwindicina includes the days from 31 July to 14 August. The triduum or last three days; the 11th, 12th, and 13th are held in church, where the parishioners take part in the religious celebration as described above. The 14th is the vigil of the feast and final day of preparation which leads up to the Feast Day proper. Late in the afternoon on the vigil the Translation of the Relic occurs. This is a solemn short procession in which the relic (shown below) is taken from one chapel in the church to the main altar for the devotion of the faithful. (Attard, 2008) In the evening there is the vigil proper with prayer and singing.

The Feast Day proper is on 15 August, and the celebration takes to the streets in a secular manner to include food, bands, an agricultural fair, horse racing and fireworks. The most important part of festa however is the Pontifical Procession, with the Cathedral Chapter and the Bishop of Gozo, which leaves from the Cathedral Church, processes through the streets of Victoria, and returns to the church once again. The titular statue of Santa Maria is escorted around in the procession by men of the church, perhaps from one of the confraternities. The band participates during the procession by playing religious marches, hymns and other music appropriate to the occasion.

There are two rival clubs in Victoria, one for Our Lady of the Assumption, of the Citadel Cathedral, the Leone (Lion) Band Club; and the other for the Basilika San Gorg, the Astra (Stars) Band Club. By comparison, the festa for Saint George is observed on 28 July, or the third Sunday. Originally, about 60 years ago, it was observed on the fourth Sunday after Easter. The date was changed in more recent years due to inclement weather. Often the decorations used during festa are passed down from generation to generation, so they can be hundreds of years old. This is true for all parishes and band clubs, dependent upon the date of their founding.

While some refurbishing is necessary over the many years of use, the parish and the club work to preserve what they can and thought it best to move the feast for Saint George to help preservation of their relics. Upon my arrival in Malta I discovered I had just missed

the feast of Saint George, but attended festa in Qala in celebration of San Giuseppe, or Saint Joseph, and that in San Lawrenz in honor of Saint Lawrence. Observing both of these feast celebrations helped me to put Victoria's festa, honoring The Assumption, in clearer overall perspective.

Rivalry occurs on the parish level only. The goal is to celebrate the best feast, characterized by the amount of street decorations, church celebrations, number of bands playing, and people in attendance, with the fireworks as the grand finale. Regardless of origin or duration there are some cleavages and divisions cutting across communities at various levels. Village unity is the ideal, but these divisions called partiti, refer to parties, or factions. Partiti are said to have pika; meaning competition, ill-feeling, or hostility between them. The oldest permanent divisions exist between the supporters of rival band clubs, and this division is directly related to the cult of the saints. Parishes celebrate many other saints in addition to the patron saint. The feasts for the secondary saints are usually less lavish than those for the titular saint. Organization of the annual festa requires much planning, and the cost of these feasts could vary considerably. The parish priest controls the planning and preparation of the internal and external celebrations in most villages. However, the priest may choose to delegate to a procurator, but sometimes to a committee. In some villages, as is the case on Gozo, the details of the external feast are handled by the band club committee.

The origin of the festa partiti are traced from between 1850 to 1900 approximately, and arose out of disputes between people or groups interested in the celebrations of the titular saint and that of a lesser saint. Disputes often result from questions of precedence, such as those which arise over their positions and role during the titular festa or at an installation ceremony of a new parish priest (Boissevain 1965:95). If the parties concerned are unable to arrive at some sort of agreement, the result could be the boycott by one or both groups of the celebration. Actions between competing groups takes place within a framework bounded by the decrees of the Church, the laws of the State and a certain body of custom. Permission from the church must be sought to hang new pictures in churches, or to use new procession routes; without which the result could be suppression of the feast, desecration of the church or the interdiction of the leaders (Boissevain 1964). Determination of position in hierarchy is determined by seniority, such as the date of ordination or appointment to office, as is the case with clergy, in concert with marks of honor conferred by Church authorities.

All groups and individuals tied to the Church are ranked, and this ranking becomes an important determinant of the order in which the participants take part. The order of precedence is an important organizational principle, operating in both the secular as well as the religious arenas, and so becomes one of the basic causes of dispute between villages and band clubs (Boissevain 1964; 1979).

When observing the Leone Band Club at festa, it is not with polished rank and file that this group marched through the streets of Victoria, with bystanders dutifully lining the streets. Rather, they appeared to stroll in a leisurely fashion, more like that of wandering minstrels, grouped with like instruments. A group of supporters, predominantly made up of children, carry the enormous Leone Band Club flag bearing the coat of arms, a lion with a lyre. Other members of the community file out of shops and line the streets like accidental participants, while family members and supporters either walk in front of or follow behind the band. Observing the occasion of this band club "parade" from one of the upper walkways of the citadel, I was somewhat confused and charmed by the camaraderie the community and the band apparently share. The followers are as much participants as the musicians and the flag bearers, and comprise the membership in the local parish of Our Lady of the Assumption.

Conclusion

In regard to band clubs, after my first visit to Gozo the impression I am left with is this: though musicians in general will improve over time, it is less about how good one is, but rather he/she participate in the organization. In this case, the band club and festa particularly related to the external celebration. A person's development as a musician is secondary to their development as a functioning part of the body as a whole. The individual's sense of loyalty to their parish church and their band club outweighs that of pride in personal achievement through music. One condition does not exist without the other. It appears to be somewhat of a symbiotic relationship. As a musician (in addition to an anthropologist), having played in various types of ensembles for over 30 years, I admit to having some preconceived ideas and expectations. However, I didn't really know what to expect from Gozitans. I would argue that the organization can only be judged by the limit of support and participation by which they function, in addition to technical merit. There is a level of pride which cannot be believed and understood until it has been witnessed. Even then, I don't know that we can fully understand it, unless we are active participants within the club itself.

Perhaps in years past, the festa celebrations in Malta may have been organized by church associations and could at times be violently competitive to the detriment of the parish community. Boissevain believed this competitive nature would possibly lead to the demise of band club culture in Malta if not curtailed. Boissevain mentions the development of church regulations in 1935 to prevent the disruption of parish harmony in rivalry between band clubs and the support for the titular saint and the celebration of other saints (Boissevain 1965: 74-75). Since that time the band clubs of Gozo have doubled in size. According to Mr. Attard this is largely due to the fact that smaller villages have begun to develop band clubs where they were previously non-existent. In part due to the nature of village competition, more like "if they can do it, so can we." It has become another means by which parishioners, young and old, can make a contribution to and show loyalty for their parish church and saints.

While disputes still occur on some level, they are not as disruptive as they once were, at least by appearance to the village outsider. The festa celebration today is largely put in the hands of the band club committee, which is made up of different persons from different political parties and social statuses (Boissevain 2006), and this is what I would argue has created a more cooperative environment between clubs and club members. The closest relationship I can equate this to in the United States is that of rival football teams and bands, competing for their respective schools. Pride is important, but in Gozo there is a level of political and religious awareness that pervades every action. As when Boissevain wrote his book, village unity is the ideal for which the clubs strive, and not all villages have resorted to physical violence.

While Boissevain's work is insightful and helpful for research purposes, I discovered I had other questions that could not be answered except by conducting field research in Gozo. I spent 20 days on the island, and came away understanding that Boissevain's body of work is still the go-to guide for better understanding Maltese culture, politics and band clubs. This paper is merely a beginning to understanding the differences between Malta and Gozo when examining band club culture on a deeper level. There are other perspectives to consider, e.g. that of the priest, the parishioner, the musician and the politician. Boissevain's focus is primarily on Malta, the main island. I chose to narrow the focus further still and look more closely at Gozo and the Gozitans, their sense of community and responsibility to their church and saints, as practiced by the musicians in the local band clubs. I was modestly successful in

my endeavor. I believe there are works left to be done and more questions yet to ask. This project will require many more hours of observation and interview to become a cohesive body of ethnographic work by which band club culture can be understood.

Notes

I was accepted to the Expeditions Applied Anthropology summer field school in Gozo, Malta for summer 2008. As an undergraduate student with interests in cultural anthropology, history and music, I wanted to focus on the music culture of the island. Of course I went straight to the internet, and included a trip to the university library at California State University, Fullerton. During my initial research I discovered there wasn't much about music, except for references to the Band Clubs of the region, and history of Western music's influence on Malta.

Upon further inquiry I found a book by Jeremy Boissevain, but remained convinced there must be something else available, and continued my search up until the day I left for Gozo. By this time the only thing of which I was certain was that I would focus my efforts on discovering what band clubs are, how they came about and what makes them different from community bands and the like in the United States and elsewhere.

When I arrived on the island I was determined to continue my research by finding other notable sources and busied myself with finding the local library. Much to my dismay I was referred to Boissevain's book not just once, but several times more by the summer school professors and the Gozo Library Archivist, Dr. Joseph Bezzina. In fact, Boissevain's book really is the leading resource in English and he is considered the master. My approach, I decided, needed to focus on current band club culture and parish politics as they apply today in Gozo, forty-three years since Boissevain published *Saints and Fireworks*. With this goal in mind I found support and help through Expeditions' professors and mentors, in addition to conversations with Anton F. Attard, respected author and retired civil servant; and Dr. Joseph Bezzina, Head of Department Church History, Patrology, and Palaeochristian Archaeology, Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta.

I would like to thank the staff at the Gozo Lending Library and at the Gozo Public Library for their patience and assistance, especially for the guidance provided by Archivist Dr. Joseph Bezzina who generously offered his time and expertise, in addition to introducing me to Anton F. Attard.

I would like to thank Mr. Attard for graciously allowing me to conduct and record an interview with him and for helping me to gain a better understanding from the Gozitan point of view. Mr. Attard's insight has provided me with valuable assistance in the interpretation of the material

and events surrounding band club culture and festa celebration. Additionally, I wish to thank Charles A. Frazee history professor emeritus, California State University, Fullerton for expertly, and gently schooling me on the Catholic terms and events I had not yet grasped. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank Professor Dr. Marc Vanlangendonck, Sam Janssen, and Joe Bryoen for their expert advice and guidance during my first anthropological field experience. Admittedly, this subject is far more complex than I had anticipated. I hope to return to Gozo in the future to continue this ethnographic study and build upon the research that I have started.

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